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Investigative policy analysis: Leveraging ethnography's postures to research secretive state policies in access-restricted authoritarian contexts

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Abstract

This article argues that the investigative postures and sensibilities inherent in ethnography can be synthesized with document-based policy analysis to assess secretive government policies in severely access-restricted contexts. It outlines 'Investigative Policy Analysis,' the approach that decisively contributed to uncovering Beijing's system of oppressive policies in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Investigative policy analysis adapts an ethnographic logic of discovery to a non-ethnographic object of inquiry. The method qualitatively differs from digital ethnography: rather than exploring online social interactions or meaning-making, it treats digital spaces as forensic repositories of bureaucratic evidence. Unlike process tracing, which maps causal links between known variables, this approach must first reconstruct the concealed policy system itself. As in microhistory, it synthesizes micro-level data points to reveal governance structures and their impact. By integrating a posture of 'fluidity' with analytical 'rigor,' this form of 'long-distance digital forensics' enables scholarly inquiry in access-restricted authoritarian settings.

Keywords

methodology, ethnography, China, Xinjiang, policy analysis, open source intelligence, investigative, authoritarianism

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The poorer the data, the more powerful are the methods which have to be employed.

Robert Fogel, 1966[1]

Introduction

Over recent decades, ethnography has explored new fields and permeated disciplines across the social sciences. Here, ethnography is broadly defined as an immersive research strategy in which researchers participate in natural settings over an extended period, deploying a flexible toolkit of data collection methods to explore a group's everyday practices and social meanings from an emic perspective (Brewer, 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Ethnographic fieldwork has followed social interaction into digital spaces (Airoldi, 2018; Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2016). Access constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated developments in remote ethnography, including ethnographic interviews via video conferencing (Howlett, 2022; Watson and Lupton, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, researchers had already employed remote ethnographic methods such as remote event participation or social media immersion to overcome access challenges (Postill, 2016).

Concurrently, academic disciplines that previously eschewed ethnographic approaches, such as political science, have begun incorporating ethnography into their methodological repertoire (Schatz, 2009). However, this integration has not necessarily adopted the core tenets or investigative postures of the ethnographic process; rather, these disciplines frequently equate 'ethnography' with fieldwork (Brodkin, 2017). Nevertheless, social sciences have increasingly recognized the utility of the postures and attitudes that underpin ethnographic practices. These include deep immersion, receptivity to serendipitous discovery, and privileging exploratory approaches over deductive hypothesis-testing (Aronoff and Kubik, 2012; Brodkin, 2017; Decker and McKinlay, 2020). Applying ethnographic principles without recourse to fieldwork constitutes the focus of this article.

This article argues that fundamental principles and postures of ethnography can be synthesized with document-based policy analysis to construct a distinct investigative approach capable of reconstructing the nature and impact of secretive government policies in access-restricted contexts (Breidenstein et al., 2013; Hammersley, 2019; Rhodes, 2015). Even as it adopts ethnography's core principles for investigative purposes, this approach differs fundamentally from the ethnographic process. While scholars have articulated strategies to obtain physical access to geographical locations, the present focus centers on settings where even limited or covert forms of fieldwork are infeasible from a practical or ethical perspective. Overcoming access restrictions is therefore taken to mean securing access to any pertinent sources of information.

Existing methodological frameworks face functional limitations in these environments. Ethnographic approaches generally predicate their inquiry on direct social immersion or active human interaction. Standard political science assumes pre-existing data

abundance and privileges methodologies requiring information that authoritarian regimes actively conceal. While state intelligence apparatuses have long utilized Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) to map governance structures, the specific Open Source Investigation (OSI) typically employed in contemporary human rights or social science research predominantly focuses on verifying isolated incidents and physical phenomena (Dubberley et al., 2020). A distinct approach is therefore necessary to bridge these gaps, one that synthesizes an investigative research posture with document-based analysis to reconstruct state policy from fragmented digital artifacts.

This article discusses the methodological principles underpinning what I term 'Investigative Policy Analysis' (IPA). I found it necessary to coin a new term for a novel research approach that draws on existing methodologies yet remains qualitatively distinct from them. This approach overcomes access limitations by combining document-based policy analysis with the investigative, exploratory, and opportunistic postures that broadly characterize ethnographic methods. While ethnographic fields have long expanded into digital and networked spaces (Burrell, 2009; Wittel, 2000), IPA diverges by substituting the study of interactive human subjects altogether with the forensic extraction of bureaucratic texts. Unlike remote or digital ethnography, which transfers the study of human culture and meaning-making processes into online spaces, IPA treats digital spaces as dynamic repositories of uncurated bureaucratic evidence rather than sites of social dynamics. Consequently, IPA differs from inductive qualitative research, which typically employs a constructivist lens to interpret social meanings or cultural norms, by adopting a critical realist stance that treats text as forensic traces used to locate the objective realities produced by secretive policies. While all research inherently "investigates" its objects of inquiry, IPA represents a deliberately constructed approach designed to overcome severe access restrictions.

Beginning in 2018, I developed IPA in the process of uncovering Beijing's oppressive policies in what the Chinese state refers to as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Xinjiang, referred to by Uyghurs as Eastern Turkestan or the "Uyghur homeland," is located in the northwest of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Annexed by China in 1949, the region is home to approximately 15 million Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples (Roberts, 2020). Following interethnic clashes between Uyghurs and Han in the regional capital of Ürümchi in 2009, Xinjiang developed one of the world's most sophisticated surveillance apparatuses, severely curtailing mobility and information flows (Smith Finley, 2019; Zenz, 2019a, 2019b, 2025). From 2017, regional authorities began implementing mass detention of ethnic group members, particularly the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, in political re-education camps (Roberts, 2020; Zenz, 2019a, 2022a, 2025; Zenz and Leibold, 2020). Since then, visiting scholars and journalists have faced surveillance, harassment, and, in some cases, detention (AFP, 2019; Smith Finley, 2018).

In this context, I developed IPA to circumvent access restrictions by exploiting overlooked online administrative data and to formulate a systematic framework capable of synthesizing these disparate data points into a coherent policy analysis. Specifically, this approach proved instrumental in reconstructing the policy frameworks governing Beijing's mass internment campaign, parent–child separation program, coercive labor

transfers, and birth prevention and sterilization policies (Zenz, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2021b, 2021c; cf. Smith Finley, 2021). By uncovering bureaucratic mechanisms, such as binding quotas, procurement bids, and planning directives, IPA substantiated the scope of policy implementation and its effects. It was this documentation of systemic, state-directed rights violations that provided the evidentiary foundation for international responses (OHCHR, 2022).

Ethnographic approaches and strategies for securing field access in authoritarian settings

Despite rising authoritarian human rights violations, scholars frequently avoid studying them due to access constraints (Carpenter, 2012; Herre and Roser, 2016). Contemporary research typically involves retrospective analyses, investigations using public data, or studies of less restricted regions (Madden and Ross, 2009; Xiao et al., 2014: 4). Consequently, a mid-2000s study found nearly half of cited references relied on secondary literature, with primary data comprising under 0.7 percent (Andreassen et al., 2017: 6). With exceptions like "guerilla interviewing," traditional social sciences often prioritize methodologies perceived to strengthen validity, replicability, and "rigor," frequently favoring quantitative over qualitative methods (Desch, 2019; Hammersley, 2018, 2019). Thus, developing methodologies for contexts lacking field or informant access has not been prioritized, leaving limited guidance for research in hostile environments (Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018: 385). Even interdisciplinary human rights scholarship has largely overlooked these access challenges (Andreassen et al., 2017; Buerger, 2018; McConnell and Smith, 2018; Stohl and Brysk, 2020).

The adoption of OSINT as Open Source Investigation (OSI) by civil society was catalyzed by the need to expose rights violations in real-time (Van Puyvelde and Tabárez Rienzi, 2025). These methods draw on diverse sources, including public websites and social media (Berkeley Law, 2022: 7). Open-source data often functions as supplementary evidence to "corroborate other evidentiary materials" (Ristovska, 2016: 349; compare Murray et al., 2022: 555). Key advantages include the ability to verify reported events and circumvent access restrictions (Murray et al., 2022; Ristovska, 2016: 351). However, OSI and investigative journalism typically focus on isolated incidents rather than systematic analyses of state policies. In short, whereas OSI exposes the physical manifestations of repression, such as camps or labor sites, IPA uncovers and reconstructs the systematic governance frameworks that underpin them.

While ethnographic scholarship frequently contends with questions of access, debates focus almost exclusively on expanding ethnography's traditional forte: the ability to conduct fieldwork. Studies explicitly addressing the methodological challenges and strategies of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in authoritarian settings remain relatively uncommon. Existing works counsel researchers to flexibly adapt to context-specific challenges, including utilizing intermediaries, cultivating trust while protecting informants, avoiding participant observation in sensitive situations, identifying less surveilled or controlled spaces, staying clear of local regimes' "red lines," and securing data during fieldwork (Ahram and Goode, 2016; Goode and Ahram, 2016; Koch, 2013; Malthaner, 2014;

Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018). To secure access in authoritarian contexts, researchers frequently avoid sensitive topics (Reny, 2016).

These methodological reflections typically presume the feasibility of at least limited fieldwork, yet Xinjiang's ubiquitous surveillance renders this impossible. Casual encounters endanger locals, while scholars face interrogation, detention, or exit bans (Salimjan, 2021). A less extreme yet broadly comparable situation prevails throughout China, where security laws restrict even innocuous topics (Sharma, 2023), mirroring challenges in contexts like North Korea or contemporary Russia.

While "being there" has been anthropology's *sine qua non*, scholars studying Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, or the PRC during and after World War II relied primarily on textual and audiovisual sources (Mead and Metraux, 2000; Postill, 2016). However, field access, once available, promptly redirected focus back to traditional fieldwork. Occasionally, ethnographers have used documentary sources to complement fieldwork, and some methodological reflections on authoritarian states have addressed document-based research (Ahram, 2016; Göbel, 2014; Morgenbesser and Weiss, 2018; Thøgersen, 2006). Yet, while acknowledging the value of archival research for past regimes, these works offer limited insight into applying text-based analysis to overcome severe access restrictions in contemporary authoritarian contexts without recourse to fieldwork.

Political science research on authoritarian regimes has drawn upon internal and public state sources (Barros, 2016; Carlitz and McLellan, 2021; Pei, 2024; Zenz, 2021c, 2025). However, scholars have not fully explored the potential of adopting ethnographic postures and sensibilities to inform a text-focused methodology capable of examining state operations where direct access remains impossible. Because the ethnographic process inherently involves creatively overcoming access obstacles, it is well-suited for investigative research. Indeed, ethnographers have frequently been characterized as detectives or spies (Austrin and Farnsworth, 2005). Yet, the discipline remains so invested in its *sine qua non* of physical fieldwork that it has not fully exploited the potential of a predominantly textual field.[2] Rather than constituting fields through human interconnectedness, scholars can follow the "digital breadcrumbs" of sources linked through the intertextuality of political concepts. This offers a systematic approach for analyzing secretive state policies from afar.

Beyond the cult of irrelevance: Adapting methodology to access-restricted contexts

None of the features characterizing Investigative Policy Analysis represents a methodological innovation in isolation. Rather, the approach's distinct ability to uncover secretive state policies emerges from their integration: merging an investigative posture (illuminating an issue from multiple perspectives) with a heuristic strategy to execute predominantly text-based policy analysis, supplemented by witness accounts and audiovisual evidence. Consequently, IPA manifests distinct characteristics from the approaches it draws upon, combining source pluralism and methodological ecumenism to achieve

"long-distance digital forensics" (Resende, 2013; Rhodes, 2015; Yaffa, 2021). Epistemologically, IPA utilizes interpretive sensibilities to decode authoritarian obfuscation, ultimately treating the resulting texts as forensic traces that establish the objective reality of concealed state policies. Here, I narrowly define "documents" as digital or physical textual sources distinct from audiovisual material (Scott, 1990: 12).

Traditional social sciences have largely gravitated toward methodologies perceived to enhance "rigor," which is equated with tightly designed quantitative or narrowly-focused single-source qualitative approaches designed to minimize subjective bias (Alpermann, 2013; Hammersley, 2019). As a result, developing approaches for contexts lacking field access has not been a priority. Even innovative qualitative approaches typically presume abundant data from a limited number of sources to achieve fairly complete coverage of a particular phenomenon (Art, 2016). Rather than adapting methodologies to regime types, political science research on authoritarianism has similarly favored quantitative analysis and deductive hypothesis testing (Goode and Ahram, 2016).

Michael Desch suggested that by pursuing "rigor" through formal quantitative approaches, political science has become a "cult of the irrelevant" because "many pressing policy questions are not readily amenable to the preferred methodological tools of political scientists" (Desch, 2019). I suggest that methodologies that overemphasize rigor at the expense of flexibility may prove inferior in accuracy. An initial posture privileging fluidity and opportunism increases the diversity of disconnected data points available for policy analysis, enabling more comprehensive triangulation and greater empirical detail.

This article's structure mirrors the approach's development from practice to theory. Section two details the operational framework and five-stage process, demonstrating the method's application through empirical case studies of mass internment, parent-child separation, and forced labor in Xinjiang. Section three moves from application to conceptualization to explicate the theoretical lineage, detailing the synthesis of postures from ethnography, open source investigation, and historical research. Section four situates the approach theoretically by distinguishing it from adjacent methods. The final section addresses the approach's key limitations.

The process of conducting investigative policy analysis

Outlining the investigative policy analysis process and its requirements

Investigative Policy Analysis can be used in access-restricted contexts with sufficient availability of diverse yet interconnected ("intertextual") policy-relevant textual sources. A diversity of sources and materials is needed to provide sufficiently "thick" accounts of relevant policies, while their interconnectedness through intertextual tracing enables researchers to triangulate data points, ensuring they reflect actual policy and implementation. The discovery and tracing of central keywords, or *tifas* in the Chinese context, constitutes the methodology's single most essential strategy. Rather than shunning records to avoid scrutiny, authoritarian regimes routinely rely on extensive paper trails, although these are often classified (Barros, 2016). The Chinese context is particularly suited to this approach as comparatively detailed publicly available government reporting

mechanisms exist, including statistical yearbooks (Alpermann and Fröhlich, 2020). Of particular significance is the PRC's systemic reliance on a highly standardized and stable terminological framework.

While IPA mitigates the need for concurrent physical presence, it relies heavily on the researcher's linguistic skills and contextual literacy, much of which requires prior field exposure. My ability to "read between the lines" of propaganda was grounded in 16 months of prior ethnographic fieldwork in a region neighboring Xinjiang: Tibetan areas in Qinghai province (Zenz, 2013). While distinct, both regions operate under analogous ethnic policy frameworks and the distinctive governance approach of the Chinese party-state. For researchers applying IPA without such a background, this necessitates alternative strategies for acquiring context, such as engagement with diaspora communities or exhaustive immersion in secondary area studies literature.

IPA integrates a flexible, investigative posture into a progressively structured analytical process. As research iterates between raw empirical data and theoretical frameworks, generative creativity must be paired with rigorous evaluation and triangulation of data into conceptual anchor points. Searches are initially wide-ranging, and then become gradually more focused. Like the shape of a funnel, the process starts with a broad space for creative exploration but concludes with a structured account. The resulting interplay between fluidity (creative source identification, methodological opportunism) and rigor (verification, triangulation, policy analysis) enables the researcher to circumvent access restrictions while yielding accurate analytical results (Wong, 2016). This process broadly encompasses five phases:

1. *Entry Point Identification:* The research process commences with the identification of initial evidence. This typically includes witness accounts or reports from the ground that prompt the inquiry and provide preliminary search clues and related keywords.
2. *Exploratory Search and Terminology Identification:* The researcher conducts an investigative search process to identify the genesis and usage of key terms denoting policy frameworks. This phase involves immersive and opportunistic exploration of new data sources to uncover specific nomenclature.
3. *Initial Policy Framing:* This phase identifies relevant policy frameworks or their components. Even if covering only one aspect of the issue, they provide a foundation for identifying broader implementation and serve as key conceptual anchor points for subsequent phases.
4. *Iterative Analysis:* The research proceeds abductively, iterating between integrating new data and re-examining existing material. Facing incomplete sources, the researcher illuminates policy from multiple angles to generate a "credible whole" (Myrdal, 2011: 185). As conceptual dimensions are established, initially exhaustive searches become progressively more targeted, balancing fluidity and rigor until the policy is sufficiently documented.
5. *Research Output:* The final phase presents triangulated evidence anchored in immediately applicable policy frameworks at all relevant conceptual and

administrative levels. To ensure transparency and replicability, the researcher must archive all sources and support claims through multiple citations.

By integrating linguistic fluency and contextual knowledge with policy analysis, this framework systematically transforms the opportunistic discovery of digital fragments into a rigorous reconstruction of state policy.

Documenting Xinjiang's campaign of mass internment

For decades, China studies contended with severe limitations on information access. "Pekingologists" resorted to proxy measures, piecing together diverse and fragmentary data points and reading between the lines of propagandistic texts (Goldstein, 1996; Whyte et al., 1977). Field access expanded following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the implementation of reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. From the 2000s, China's internet added a "phenomenal additional array of sources," providing access to data ranging from government agencies to academic publications that "in the early years of study would have been difficult, if not impossible, to access" (Lieberthal, 2010: 272).

When initial evidence emerged in 2017 and 2018 suggesting Xinjiang's mass detention of ethnic group members in re-education camps, the primary methodological challenge for research lay in establishing a conceptual entry point. The designation of these internment facilities and their governing policy frameworks remained obscure as they operated outside existing penal systems. The investigative approach I developed to document these mass internments shares certain characteristics with OSI/OSINT (OHCHR and HRC, 2022). However, as detailed below, this approach diverges qualitatively by targeting the systematic reconstruction of state policies in their entirety.

Initially, I used extensive exploratory searches in Chinese to identify search terms by uncovering nomenclature conventions for the facilities and their "re-education" process. Understanding this terminology proved crucial because the facilities initially featured a bewildering array of labels, ranging from "legal system transformation-through-education-schools" to "vocational skills education and training centers" (VSETCs). The discovery of the key term denoting Xinjiang's camp-based re-education, *jiaoyu zhuanhua*, literally "transformation-through-education," was made through broad exploratory searches focused on (a) "deradicalization" practices, and (b) recent efforts to re-educate groups resistant to state ideology.

Casting a wide net across the Chinese internet yielded only sparse evidence on contemporary re-education camps, yet revealed numerous candid reports on earlier experimental re-education efforts, often documented in local news outlets. As observed by Kremlinologists and Pekingologists, experimental phases result in greater dissemination of policy implementation efforts (Mills, 1985). By 2014, local Uyghur counties had begun consolidating initial re-education efforts by establishing dedicated internment facilities (Xinjiang Daily, 2014). The investigation entailed relentless, months-long search efforts comprising nearly a thousand hours of "sleuthing" around all corners of the Chinese internet. The findings revealed only small numbers of budget documents detailing government expenditures on camps and occasional recruitment notices

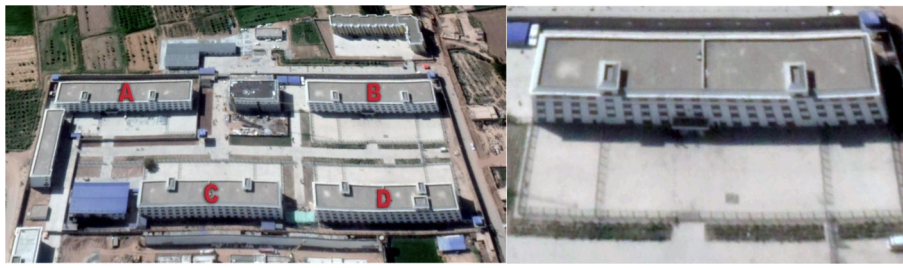

Figure 1. Satellite images show the Konasheher County transformation-through-education school next to a detention center, as specified in the construction bid dated April 26, 2017. *Source*: Google Earth (39.35909344, 75.86358263), August 2018.

advertising police positions for "transformation-through-education bases," indicating the state's careful avoidance of incriminating terminology in known public sources.

A previously underutilized source of data was instrumental: public procurement documents. These materials contained detailed architectural and security specifications for re-education facilities, including security measures such as high perimeter walls, watchtowers, barbed wire installations, monitoring systems, and internal police stations.[3] Procurement documents frequently specified the dimensions or numbers of buildings in the intended compounds, including floor counts for each building. These details, visible in satellite imagery, permitted the triangulation of facility locations, structural dimensions, and security configurations (Figure 1).

Extensive and progressively targeted keyword searches yielded unanticipated discoveries that had evaded China's vast censorship apparatus because even highly classified policies inevitably leave "breadcrumbs" in overlooked corners of digital information spaces due to their extensive scale and societal impact. For instance, on an online legal advice platform, an individual sought guidance regarding divorce proceedings for a spouse detained in re-education for over a year. The post, dated April 16, 2018, just over a year after the initiation of the re-education campaign, indicated temporal consistency with the broader policy implementation. In another instance, a Uyghur child sought counsel on a similar website regarding the detention of their mother following her observance of Islamic mortuary rituals. Not realizing the extrajudicial nature of re-education, the child inquired about the anticipated length of the mother's putative prison sentence.

However, exploratory searches often yield seemingly disconnected information fragments. The key to connecting the dots regarding the mass internments emerged from a concealed reference to transformation-through-education in a relatively obscure legal regulation published online by the Xinjiang government in late March 2017, immediately preceding the beginning of the internment campaign (Xinjiang Government, 2017; cf. Klimeš, 2018). This De-Extremification Regulation formally authorized "deradicalization" through transformation-through-education. The temporal alignment and content of this authoritative government document provided the broader policy context and reinforced the credibility and coherence of the accumulated evidence.

Reading between the lines: Investigating parent–child separation in Xinjiang

Alongside the mass internments, diaspora Uyghurs reported that children as young as 2 years of age, with both parents in either internment or exile, were being systematically placed in full-time care or educational boarding facilities (Wang and Kang, 2018). Beyond these testimonial accounts, no obvious entry point presented itself, and initial investigative efforts yielded no relevant findings.

Approaching these narratives not merely as misinformation but as artifacts of authoritarian domination and state violence (Wedeen, 1999), I began to read between the lines of an expanding corpus of state propaganda narratives about the re-education facilities, some of which contained accounts of detained families. Several accounts indicated the establishment of educational institutions with boarding or childcare facilities adjacent to internment camps, describing children as receiving "free" accommodation. While the parents were "studying" at the (re-education) "center," their children were also "studying," with the propagandistic narrative underlining how this arrangement would ensure that their "family life will be happier in the future."

As with the methodology utilized to investigate the camps, information was iteratively gathered, analyzed, and triangulated (Zenz, 2019b). The investigation examined the phenomenon from multiple analytical angles, each contributing distinct elements to the broader empirical narrative:

- Witness accounts indicated placement of children with detained parents into state care facilities or boarding schools.
- Local government documents revealed that the state required local authorities and schools to care for children with detained parents.
- State policies at various administrative levels were designed to boost the state's institutional capacity to provide full-time child care.
- Government reports, procurement documentation, and visual materials provided evidence of the construction of securitized boarding facilities.
- Online blogs by Chinese volunteer teachers, identified through keyword searches, exposed worrying conditions: Uyghur children wearing inadequate clothing despite freezing temperatures and suffering from extended periods without basic hygiene. Educators noted that pupils' parents were "studying at the vocational center" (re-education camp).

Moving from entry point identification to triangulated policy analysis: Forced labor transfers for cotton-picking

In practice, IPA begins with a relatively common challenge: finding something very specific. To mount an exploratory search, one must first identify strategic keywords. Much like the Anglophone web, the Chinese internet contains such abundant material that even slightly different keyword combinations inundate researchers with very different, mostly irrelevant results, raising the question of how to better target one's search (Burnham et al., 2008: 218).

In the context of researching PRC human rights violations, this quest requires flexibility and persistence. In 2020, researchers approached me about finding evidence of forced labor in Xinjiang's cotton harvest, an industry known for decades to use child and adult bonded labor. However, searches using widely known terms such as "pick cotton" (*caihua*) returned generic reports about Xinjiang's cotton production. Then, while researching the region's increasingly coercive poverty alleviation programs, I unexpectedly came across a Ministry of Agriculture report describing a seasonal employment ("labor transfer") program that mobilized 210,000 rural workers from Uyghur heartland regions to pick cotton in regions of Xinjiang dominated by Han-Chinese (PRC Ministry of Agriculture, 2018). The terminology placed the program within the region's broader coercive poverty alleviation measures targeting Uyghurs for employment. However, the report used a relatively unknown term for "picking cotton" (*shihua*). I then used this term to systematically comb through the Chinese government, state media, and local news and propaganda websites. Findings were archived and recorded in overview files, sorted by conceptual level (such as higher-level policy versus local implementation or propaganda reports), and iteratively coded by thematic sub-categories.

The results showed a systematic state policy of coercively transferring Uyghurs designated as 'rural surplus laborers' into cotton picking (Zenz, 2020b, 2023a). One image from 2017 showed elderly villagers boarding a bus to engage in this intensive physical labor since many younger men had been detained. In a Kashgar village where officials described villagers as "unwilling to go out to work," state work teams entered every home for a "second time" to undertake "thought education work" until 60 people had been mobilized to pick cotton (Jiashi County Government, 2017).

Ultimately, this iterative progression from fluid exploration to structured verification enables researchers to assemble disparate fragments into a cohesive framework, revealing the underlying mechanisms of the labor transfer policy system.

Influences from ethnography, open source intelligence, and historical method

To overcome access restrictions, Investigative Policy Analysis combines core postures of the ethnographic process with research strategies linked to OSI/OSINT and historical methods. These postures include integrative, opportunistic, exploratory, abductive, investigative, immersive, and connection-focused orientations. However, the approach should neither be confused with the emerging subfield of digital or remote ethnography nor with methods that complement fieldwork with digital or document-based sources. These distinctions are outlined in the next section. Without fieldwork or participant observation, text-based investigative approaches cannot explicate emic perceptions of government behavior or local sociocultural dynamics.

Ethnography is an interdisciplinary, integrative process that opportunistically pursues diverse methods to produce dense empirical accounts (Breidenstein et al., 2013; Hammersley, 2018; Resende, 2013). Irreducible to a single method, it employs a methodological "ragbag," rejecting "cookbook" approaches in favor of an "ecumenical

approach to data collection" (Resende, 2013: 515; Rhodes, 2015: 180). This makes ethnography hard to define, a sentiment that similarly applies to OSI and was aptly captured by Eliot Higgins, founder of the Open Source Investigation group Bellingcat: "We are not exactly journalists, nor human-rights activists, nor computer scientists, nor archivists, nor academic researchers, nor criminal investigators, but at the nexus of all those disciplines" (Yaffa, 2021).

Such "methodological opportunism" can enable one to discover useful sources often missed by traditional academic approaches. Biologist-historian Zhores Medvedev, who described his approach as "scientific detective work," triangulated bits of evidence gleaned from Soviet academic publications to uncover a nuclear disaster in the Urals that the state had kept hidden for decades (Medvedev, 1978: 8). Similarly, Bellingcat's success stems from its pragmatic pursuit of all relevant data sources, using telephone metadata and flight records to implicate Russian state security in the poisoning of Alexei Navalny (Yaffa, 2021). After Bellingcat provided evidence that a Russian anti-aircraft system likely shot down Flight MH17 over Ukraine, a person close to the Dutch Joint Investigation Team remarked that it "was a real eye-opener that so much information was available on social media" (Yaffa, 2021). Likewise, when I presented data on police recruitment in Tibet at a conference, researchers were surprised that such information was publicly available (cf. Fischer and Zenz, 2018). While researching parent-child separation in Xinjiang, I stumbled across a policy about establishing village-based factories with on-site nurseries. This policy constituted a key aspect of coercive labor transfers and led to the first research uncovering non-internment forced labor. Ethnography and IPA thus share an embrace of serendipity (Thøgersen, 2006: 17).

Ethnography is exploratory and abductive. Its research logic is "a 'puzzling-out process' [in which] the researcher tacks … back and forth in an iterative-recursive fashion between what is puzzling and possible explanations for it'" (Rhodes, 2015: 178). Much as crime investigations employ a "complex form of sense-making," abduction starts by making plausible conjectures, then explores related evidence and tests the most promising ones to arrive at an "explanatory adequacy" (Mulderrig et al., 2019: 5). Similarly, IPA often starts with witness accounts that provide a basic working hypothesis. The exploratory investigation then proceeds abductively, iterating between raw data and conceptual-theoretical frames.

While ethnography has long been recognized as inherently investigative (Austrin and Farnsworth, 2005: 152), traditional policy analysis often lacks this posture. IPA bridges this gap by applying the ethnographer's "detective" posture to forensic textual analysis. Ballvé (2020: 240) argues that ethnography and investigative journalism both focus on access that can be challenging to secure. His "investigative ethnography" approach to researching violent conflict in Colombia describes "recursive triangulation" between interviews, public records, and legal documents, with one bit of information leading to the next (Ballvé, 2020: 247). Bellingcat's tactics similarly follow a "trail of digital 'breadcrumbs'" (Croxton, 2020). This pursuit represents a key IPA strategy akin to Bruno Latour's observation that sociologists' terrains consist of rhizome-like networks instead of clearly delineated territories (Latour, 1996: 36).

Similarly, historical methodology has been compared to "detective work," and historical research is frequently investigative, pursuing an "eclectic, flexible orientation" (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 169; King, 2016: 45). This affinity is particularly pronounced in the field of microhistory, which emphasizes the intensive investigation of specific phenomena through fragmentary and oblique sources. The underlying logic of this approach is what Carlo Ginzburg (1989) termed the evidential or conjectural paradigm: the reconstruction of hidden realities through the abductive interpretation of clues. IPA operates according to this paradigm, treating seemingly marginal digital artifacts as semiotic indicators of concealed state policies. Furthermore, historians have long recognized the necessity of combining "isolated fragments" from "disparate sources" to investigate obscure phenomena, a strategy Janken Myrdal terms "source pluralism" (Myrdal, 2011: 155–157). Citing his study estimating medieval black plague deaths through proxy indicators such as declining tax payments or an increase in wills, Myrdal notes that source-pluralistic approaches "bring entirely new knowledge to light" (Myrdal, 2011: 162).

IPA compensates for the absence of one single comprehensive data source by illuminating policy from multiple angles that each provide partial but mutually complementary insight, gradually resulting in a "credible whole" (Myrdal, 2011: 185). Both microhistory and IPA engage in an iterative process that involves networks of disparate yet interconnected effects and clues, working backward to reconstruct the systems that produced them.

Ethnography focuses on deep immersion to produce Clifford Geertz's "thick descriptions" (Rhodes, 2015: 174). Remote ethnography seeks to replicate this field-based authenticity through digital means (Howlett, 2022; Postill, 2016; Watson and Lupton, 2022). IPA adapts "thick description" to the complex machinery of state implementation. Drawing on the anthropology of bureaucracy, it treats documents as possessing a "social life," viewing them as active sites of state anxiety and categorization (Stoler, 2009). This requires extensive textual immersion to achieve what Gayatri Spivak calls "critical intimacy," a necessity given that official sources often assume contextual familiarity (Decker and McKinlay, 2020). Similar to Bellingcat's "detail-oriented obsessives," who analyze footage with "the patience of an ornithologist" (Yaffa, 2021), insights often emerge unexpectedly. Historian Zachary Schrag likens this to prospecting, where novices often tread unaware on gold dust simply because it lacks glitter (Schrag, 2021: 247).

Finally, ethnography, OSI, and IPA share a dedicated focus on pursuing connections. Ethnographers seek access to trace human relatedness across the online/offline divide (Jensen, 2022). While traditional fields were predetermined bounded areas, recent scholarship views fields as flexibly constructed networks emerging from trails of connectedness (Airoldi, 2018; Marcus, 1989; Schulte-Römer and Gesing, 2023). Consequently, fieldwork ultimately prioritizes entry points over physical sites (Burrell, 2009). Although all social sciences examine relationships, ethnography is uniquely characterized by its flexible, opportunistic explication of networks of human interaction.

The "fields" of research approaches, such as archival research, OSI, and IPA are best conceptualized as multi-sited networks of connectedness, though their nodes comprise textual and audiovisual artifacts bound together by themes, events, or state policies

and practices (Decker and McKinlay, 2020; Dimitrov, 2023). While these "fields" are textual rather than human in nature, the strategies undergirding the identification and pursuit of related trails of connectedness align with those employed by ethnographers. Consequently, ethnographic postures and sensibilities can be utilized without a primary focus on human interaction.

Differentiating investigative policy analysis from ethnography, open source intelligence, and policy analysis through process tracing

A brief comparative analysis of IPA with its methodological antecedents clarifies its distinctive characteristics. While IPA could be contextualized against several methodological approaches, this analysis focuses on particularly salient comparisons: (1) ethnography; (2) OSI/OSINT; (3) within political science, the more fine-grained approach of policy analysis through process tracing; and (4) various other approaches, examining why the latter methods did not—and typically cannot—achieve comparable analytical outputs.

Ethnography, OSI/OSINT, and investigative journalism

As previously discussed, Investigative Policy Analysis diverges from conventional fieldwork-based approaches, including ethnography itself, given that its "fields," like those of archival ethnography, are constituted by digital artifacts. While IPA shares the inductive logic of grounded theory and the anthropology of the state, its analytical objective differs: whereas those traditions typically analyze documents to interpret the cultural dynamics or social life of bureaucratic institutions, IPA interrogates them to reverse-engineer concealed security architectures and reconstruct specific policy mechanisms.

While digital ethnography focuses on human networks and the cultural meanings produced through interaction, IPA focuses on the state, treating online texts as forensic traces of a concealed political system. The researcher must inhabit the cognitive worldview of the regime, acquiring fluency in its internal language to "think like the state," whereas the digital ethnographer reads them to understand the lived experience of participants.

This highlights a fundamental epistemological divergence: while inductive qualitative research generally operates within a constructivist framework to interpret social processes and meanings from the "bottom up," IPA adopts a critical realist perspective. While it must interpret the state's ideological narratives to decode its sources, IPA ultimately treats documents as a forensic repository of traces, using them to map the objective realities of a secretive policy rather than the cultural norms of its authors. Ultimately, whereas the former seeks to explain a social phenomenon, such as the culture of bureaucracy, the latter aims to structurally reverse-engineer the mechanisms of a concealed system.

Both IPA and OSI/OSINT fundamentally differ from more traditional, online/remote, or hybrid forms of ethnography in that their primary analytical focus is not on human

relatedness, interaction, or worlds of meaning (i.e., forms of "culture"), but rather on evidence facilitating the production of systematic accounts documenting events, policies, and their impact.[4] OSI approaches provided significant initial data on the mass internment campaign by analyzing social media imagery and correlating satellite images with construction bids (Zhang, 2019). However, IPA, rather than OSI or investigative journalism, revealed the systematic nature and policy frameworks of these atrocities. Because OSI prioritizes audiovisual evidence, textual sources often serve only auxiliary functions like geolocation (Dubberley et al., 2020). Consequently, this approach typically does not systematically explicate undocumented policy frameworks, and practitioners often lack familiarity with policy analysis principles (Akhgar et al., 2016).

Similarly, while investigative journalism involves substantive document analysis, it rarely engages in policy analysis (Akhgar et al., 2016; Houston and Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc, 2009). For instance, a Pulitzer Prize-winning report on Xinjiang forced labor relied on the author's conceptual work (Killing and Rajagopalan, 2021; cf. Zenz, 2019c, 2021a, 2023b). Although IPA employs technical searches and forensic analysis resembling OSI methods (Dubberley et al., 2020), these remain subordinate to policy analysis. IPA further distinguishes itself from OSI and investigative journalism by prioritizing broader systemic dynamics over particular incidents. It constructs systematic accounts based on what Murray et al. (2022: 557) term "individual or unique pieces of primary data." While incorporating secondary data, the primary objective remains the triangulation of isolated fragments to create a comprehensive account.

Policy analysis through process tracing

Policy analysis has increasingly adopted process tracing to produce detailed qualitative accounts that use micro-tracing to map the links between a structural cause and its effects, such as how democratic processes promote peace (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 38). Process tracing comes in three forms: theory-testing, theory-building, and "explanation-outcome." Similar to IPA, explanation-outcome policy tracing uses abduction to uncover plausible mechanisms for puzzling outcomes (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 18–20). Other similarities include reliance on document analysis as a core form of evidence and case-centric rather than theory-oriented approaches.

IPA differs from process tracing in several respects. First, process tracing is not inherently investigative, although it can be deployed within more investigative approaches, as evidenced by Jakob Hauter's (2023) work combining process tracing with OSINT analysis to assess Russia's role in the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Second, and more importantly, IPA proceeds from a different starting point. Unlike explanation-outcome process tracing, which maps mechanistic linkages to outcomes, IPA starts with mere anecdotal evidence of probable cause and apparent effect (i.e., camps produce internment victims) to reconstruct the concealed system itself. It must then demonstrate that the anecdotal is systematic. The focus is on outlining policy and its implementation rather than tracing cause and effect. In short, process tracing, especially its explanation-outcome variant, employs a structured process to identify constellations of mechanisms that were jointly sufficient to produce an outcome (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Conversely, IPA pursues

the forensic reconstruction of a secretive policy itself, rather than a mechanistic explanation of it.

Archival research, critical discourse analysis, and other approaches

While Investigative Policy Analysis resembles much of the scholarship on Chinese politics in content and focus, its investigative approach differentiates it. This also distinguishes it from qualitative studies that examine unconventional new data sources, yet, in line with established social science research, focus predominantly on a single source or document type, even when supplemented by a limited number of contextualizing sources. Examples include Batke and Ohlberg's (2020) study of procurement documents related to China's state surveillance apparatus, Grose's (2022) examination of social media posts by local officials in Xinjiang, or my earlier work on police recruitment (Zenz and Leibold, 2020).

Archival research has played an instrumental role in studies of authoritarian regimes, but its primary limitation lies in its restricted utility for documenting contemporary state policies. Recent works by Martin Dimitrov (2023) and Minxin Pei (2024) outlined sensitive Chinese domestic security mechanisms, but such sources are limited by their availability and retrospective focus. While general yearbooks may be more current, more sensitive sources used by the aforementioned scholars typically do not extend beyond the 2000s. This renders them largely unsuited for the timely assessment of contemporary phenomena.

IPA also differs from comprehensive reviews of policies in sensitive regions such as Xinjiang. For example, James Leibold's (2020) review of surveillance policies or Kam and Clarke's (2021) survey of securitization practices draw upon diverse sources to conduct broad surveys of state practices and attendant political discourses. These important studies pursue breadth over depth to present overviews of emerging broader situations. Key policy concepts receive brief treatment, providing readers with just enough information to grasp their position within the broader framework. IPA, by contrast, starts with extensive exploration but produces an in-depth assessment of a single policy or a limited set of interconnected policies.

A distinguishing feature of IPA, and arguably its most significant technique for finding and interpreting political and propagandistic texts, is its exploitation of intertextuality. Intertextuality, defined as "the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text," is a fundamental feature of Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA (Mulderrig et al., 2019: 8). IPA and CDA, alongside interpretative approaches to policy analysis, are distinct methodological approaches. Whereas many of the latter are rooted in social constructionism and focus on the politics of meaning-making, IPA is grounded in ontological realism, prioritizing the accurate forensic reconstruction of concealed state policies and their impacts (cf. Fairclough, 2013). While inherently treating its sources as socio-political constructs, it is characterized by a "forensic realism" that utilizes the flexibility of interpretive inquiry to achieve the rigor of evidentiary documentation.

Within CDA and related approaches such as Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, intertextuality has been employed to examine "global patterns and relations between texts"

(Mulderrig et al., 2019: 8). Michael Farrelly's (2019) uncommon attempt to operationalize intertextuality as an analytical framework argues that it can examine networks of "inter-texts," which then become units of analysis for assessing linkages to social practice. Others have noted the significance of intertextual analysis for examining contextual meanings of policy discourses through surrounding documentary sources (e.g., Gale, 2006). While scholars frequently noted the utility of intertextuality for critical discourse analysis, its significance for investigative research has not received widespread recognition.

In China's system of governance, intertextuality occupies a central position due to the predominance of *tifas*, variously referred to as fixed formulations, watchwords, or "[p]olitically binding standard phrases" that steer political discourse and streamline policy implementation (Heilmann, 2017: 313). The *tifa* concept originated in Confucian thought, which postulated that a functioning society requires correct nomenclature (Schoenhals, 1992). Mao Zedong adopted *tifas* to enforce a "rectification of names," ensuring unified and ideologically correct linguistic presentation of key political concepts to guide a vast party-state apparatus (Alvaro, 2013: 148–149). *Tifas* constrain subordinate actors by circumscribing their thinking and acting within formalized political contexts and conventions, and deviations from exact wording constitute "very serious transgressions" (Link, 2013; Shambaugh, 2007: 53).

Scholars have yet to fully explicate the investigative utility of tracing *tifas* for policy analysis. IPA exploits the intertextuality created by the CCP's reliance on *tifas* by forensically tracking them through a multi-stage process: initial identification of relevant *tifas* through exploratory searches; using these to iteratively trace networks of applicable intertexts; analyzing variation in *tifa* use in different contexts and over time; and reconstructing the policy framework(s) under investigation through synthesis.

Limitations and strategies for addressing them

Like other forms of long-distance "forensics," Investigative Policy Analysis represents a methodological compromise born out of necessity. It encounters limitations comparable to those faced by OSI/OSINT or the historical method and employs similar strategies to mitigate their effects. A full discussion of these limitations and mitigation strategies exceeds the scope of this article. Below, I briefly address a few of them.

Data manipulation and the gap between policy and its implementation

Authoritarian regimes use coercion and concealment to obfuscate their operations while manipulating publicly accessible information (Carlitz and McLellan, 2021; Goode and Ahram, 2016). Non-democratic states now publish a plethora of fine-grained data, but manipulate such information for political purposes. Counterstrategies include critically reflecting on the motivations of data-commissioning entities and anticipating data manipulation.

Like most textual sources in access-restricted settings, Chinese internet sources are shaped by propaganda, censorship, and self-censorship (Shambaugh, 2007).

Researchers routinely anticipate and adapt to these conditions through critical textual engagement and triangulation, reading texts against the grain and assuming inherent preference falsification (Alpermann and Fröhlich, 2020; Göbel, 2014; Whyte et al., 1977). Policy texts contain combinations of factual and ideological elements as they seek to frame social issues within officially sanctioned objectives, demonstrate faithful policy implementation, and achieve various purposes related to cadre promotion or the acquisition of policy-related benefits (Hillman, 2016; Mulderrig et al., 2019). Propagandistic intensity varies by genre: top-down mandates often prioritize instructional clarity, whereas local reports frequently emphasize performative achievements to satisfy evaluation metrics. Beyond this performative function, however, even highly propagandistic accounts exert causal effects on their social context, a dynamic articulated by Norman Fairclough (2013). Generally, while official texts cannot be taken to offer "a true depiction of events," they ultimately depict "the policy goals of the regime" (Sverdrup-Thygeson and Stenslie, 2023). Even when policy instructions appear formulaic, sanitized, or euphemistic, they reflect the state's intent and consequently facilitate policy analysis when triangulated within a matrix of fragmented yet interconnected data points.

A primary limitation of IPA is assessing implementation without field access. When interviews or participant observation are impossible, textual sources must be heavily triangulated. For example, policy evidence on systematic birth prevention among Uyghur women in 2017/2018 aligned with precipitous birth rate declines, increased sterilization rates, and victim testimonies of involuntary sterilization during the same period (Associated Press, 2020; Zenz, 2020a, 2021b). Similarly, intensified transfers of Uyghurs to pick cotton corresponded with both related higher-level policy directives and propaganda accounts featuring "happy" plantation owners stating how they no longer needed Han migrant laborers (Zenz 2020b, 2023a, 2023b). While such accounts are crafted to signal policy implementation to higher levels, often in idealized or exaggerated form, they are not outright fabrications. The convergence of diverse accounts, while not indicative of homogeneous policy implementation, provides substantive evidence that these policies extend beyond mere rhetorical exercises.

Local implementation of central or provincial government directives can vary significantly, a phenomenon previously described as "fragmented authoritarianism" or "selective policy implementation" (O'Brien and Li, 1999). However, substantial re-centralization under Xi Jinping prompted scholars of Chinese politics to revisit the selectivity question (Schubert and Alpermann, 2019). In regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet, recent state efforts to streamline policy implementation and eliminate and severely punish administrative laxity have acquired increasing urgency, narrowing the gap between policy formulation and implementation (Zenz, 2021c).

Witness accounts provide essential entry points for research and illuminate on-the-ground realities. However, unless witnesses possess relevant policy expertise, their testimonies typically serve a complementary rather than primary function for IPA. Witnesses often lack familiarity with policy frameworks, rendering it challenging to correlate their personal experiences with specific policy mechanisms. Similarly, archival research has noted that contemporary witnesses frequently introduce hindsight bias and sensemaking,

phenomena that scholars have also observed among Uyghur witnesses (Decker and McKinlay, 2020; Frangville, 2022).

The impacts of limited data availability, search concentration, and search bias

Archival scholarship has critically reflected on how the selective control of records "constrain[s] the types of histories made possible" (King, 2016: 19). Similar constraints apply to online sources; Taylor Fravel suggested early on that the internet might imperceptibly steer scholars toward "the most researchable topics" (Fravel, 2000). In sensitive regions like Xinjiang, policy research has been particularly impacted by the scarcity of evidence regarding policy genesis and provincial-level directives. This constraint compelled scholars to infer high-level intent from lower-level implementation documents, such as assessing re-education camp security through construction bids or birth prevention policies through sterilization targets in performance evaluations (Zenz, 2019a, 2020a).

Studies of authoritarian regimes have argued that internal state documents are indispensable for understanding their inner workings (Barros, 2016). For assessing policy developments in Uyghur regions, however, internal state documents did not supplant IPA in initially uncovering these policies. Serving in a complementary role, they subsequently offered unparalleled visibility into the regime's internal decision-making, the evolution of policy, and the centralized coordination of the state apparatus (Zenz, 2021c, 2022a, 2022b, 2025).[5]

IPA identifies strategic keywords and leverages their semantic and contextual linkages (Guha et al., 2003) to drive informational, rather than purely navigational, exploratory search processes (Jensen et al., 2008). Related challenges arise from search engine bias and concentration (Jiang, 2014). Search engines employ algorithms to manage the presentation of large result sets, prioritizing results deemed most relevant to specific queries (Burnham et al., 2008: 217). This algorithmic tailoring can inadvertently reinforce confirmation bias by creating information loops that mirror the researcher's initial assumptions. Search results also exhibit significant variation based on keyword combinations and differ across search engines. This potential constraint is the most limiting factor during the initial exploratory research phase. "Ethnographic" search approaches mitigate this effect through diverse keyword combinations and hundreds of hours spent perusing varied results across different search engines.

Subjectivity and replicability

Historian Myrdal's discussion of source pluralism cites the risk of overestimating the representativeness of evidence, highlighting a structural vulnerability to confirmation bias where the researcher may subconsciously select only data that aligns with emerging hypotheses (Myrdal, 2011: 170–177). Scholars can mitigate bias by employing a Popperian logic of refutation (Rhodes, 2015: 178). However, investigator triangulation offers the most effective strategy. Research uncovering Xinjiang's atrocities benefited from scholars working within various fields arriving at similar conclusions (e.g., Byler, 2019; Kam and Clarke, 2021; Leibold, 2020; Ryan et al., 2018).

Most importantly, IPA must engage in actual policy analysis. Triangulated findings must be analyzed and presented by strictly situating them within immediately applicable policy frameworks. As others adopted this approach, some engaged in superficial keyword-matching devoid of rigorous policy analysis. However, the conceptual benefit of investigative approaches does not solely rest on achieving progressive rigor. The initial posture of fluidity is equally essential for reliable results, as it increases the quantity and diversity of disconnected data points that form the foundation for the policy analysis process. Finally, replicability requires citing all data sources. It therefore remains incumbent upon scholars utilizing this approach to ensure adequate attribution.

Conclusions

As entry to authoritarian field sites recedes, social science must reconcile empirical rigor with foreclosed physical access. Investigative policy analysis offers a pathway through this impasse by synthesizing the heuristic fluidity of ethnography with the evidentiary strictures of policy analysis. At a time when scholars debate the continued viability of "ethnography" as a methodological construct, this article highlights the enduring significance of ethnography's postures and sensibilities for informing long-distance investigative research into access-restricted authoritarian contexts (Hammersley, 2018).

Adopting this adversarial posture creates a methodological arms race between concealment and discovery. Following the publication of my research on Xinjiang's internment camps, authorities removed procurement documents outlining security specifications. As in ethnography, digital search processes leave traceable signatures, and just as fieldworkers' presence risks "disturbing the site," investigative online research can similarly "disturb" its "field" (Austrin and Farnsworth, 2005: 149). Consequently, this methodology constitutes a dynamic practice requiring constant adaptation to tightening information controls.

The utility of Investigative Policy Analysis extends beyond the PRC. As information autocracies proliferate, the ability to read the bureaucratic agency of documents becomes indispensable. Xinjiang illustrates that even securitized projects cannot exist in a vacuum; they require a bureaucracy to function, and bureaucracies generate text (Mattis, 2023). In an era of authoritarian resurgence, the most powerful tool remains the interrogation of the traces the state cannot help but leave behind. The cross-pollination of investigative and ethnographic methods promises to sustain substantive inquiry into these opaque regimes.

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Notes

1. Robert Fogel, quoted in Walder (1979: 574).
2. An exception is Hammersley (2018), who while reflecting on the very meaning of "ethnography" contemplates whether it could perhaps "rely entirely on interviews and documents" (p.5).
3. In 2018, a Chinese student based in Canada used satellite imagery from Google Earth to geolocate the camps based on architectural features, co-location with existing detention centers, and addresses mentioned in public construction bids (Zhang, 2019).
4. The "Remote XUAR" (Xinjiang) project combines forms of remote ethnography with aspects of the investigative analysis approach I charted, coupling interviews with documentary and satellite (OSINT) analysis: https://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/en/news-and-events/news/detail/news/euprojekt-remotexuar/.
5. See e.g. Zenz (2021c) or https://www.xinjiangpolicefiles.org/.

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Further biographical details and a full list of publications can be viewed at https://victimsofcommunism.org/leader/adrian-zenz-phd/.